

“The games-as-an-art-form argument is dead”– Exploring expressions of games in Australian museums

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Keywords

Museums, games, preservation, exhibitions, game design

INTRODUCTION

The increasing presence of games in Australian museums has been well documented (Arneil 2024, Brin & McMaster 2018, Connor 2025), yet work that examines the relationship between games and museums is often suffused by a sense of unease. Authors are either imparting the urgency of games preservation, entreating museums to move faster with conservation efforts (Barwick et al. 2011, Lowood et al. 2009), or asserting the validity of games in the museum context and describing the associated challenges in their exhibition (Appleby 2023, Oulton 2019). Parallel to this sits the literature that examines the design of games for museums, including much of my own research (Beavis et al. 2021, Booij 2024, Seale et al. 2025). This work carries similar anxieties, and often positions games as tools with which to advance museum goals in a way that is both reliant on and simultaneously diminishes or seeks to render irrelevant the entertainment qualities of games. This defensiveness is likely a product of the museum as both a leisure and an educational environment (Falk 2016). However, it sits awkwardly alongside the work on bringing videogames into the museum, which openly appreciates the cultural relevance of games as leisure activities or their artistic or design qualities.

To probe these tensions, and to build an understanding of how Australian museums in particular are grappling with these challenges, I interviewed 17 museum professionals about their use of games across ACMI, the Powerhouse Museum, Science Gallery Melbourne, MOD., and the Australian Maritime Museum. I kept the scope broad in order to learn how museum professionals conceptualised games, and to not inadvertently exclude particular expressions of games that I had not necessarily accounted for. I sought participants in a range of positions, including leadership, curatorial, education, and public programs, as well as two game developers whose games had been acquired and exhibited by ACMI and the Powerhouse respectively. From this data, I have constructed a typology of games in museums (Seale et al. 2024), and through further thematic analysis (full paper forthcoming), I have

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2026

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identified that games in Australian museums fit into one or more of the following practices: documentation, display, dialogue, and design.

Documentation describes the work that is being done to collect and conserve games as heritage material. Much of the literature on this topic argues for diverse collections policies, emphasising not only the preservation of games beyond the mainstream, but also an acknowledgement of games as complex entities with no fixed state (Eklund et al. 2019; Manning 2017, Stuckey 2014, Swalwell 2017). Although the same urgency applies to the preservation of Australian games as it does globally (and is similarly challenged by resourcing constraints), Australian museum professionals showed a nuanced perspective, recognising them not only as playable designed objects, but as sophisticated structures of networked paratexts made up of many individual and community experiences, embedded in player and developer ecosystems, and changing over time.

Display represents the use of games in exhibition contexts, separate to their presence in a museum's collection. Similarly to documentation, the question of what aspect of the game to display—the art or design, the playable experience, or the cultural context—is central. Although participants were cognisant of this, and were often trying to represent multiple aspects of games within a single exhibition, the low frequency of exhibitions featuring games presents challenges for serving multiple audiences.

Dialogue—the interaction between museums and games communities—represents a key strength of Australian museums. Both ACMI and the Powerhouse have artistic residencies for game developers, and find many other ways to support devs outside of this. Similarly, Science Gallery Melbourne recently hosted Freeplay's Angles conference, facilitating a direct dialogue between the gallery and the Freeplay community. This dialogue is critical for mediating the imposition of institutional biases in the exhibition of games (Eklund et al. 2019, McMaster 2018). Several participants touched on legitimacy, directly referencing the games-as-art debate (Parker 2018). There is a strong perception that the inclusion of games in museums confers legitimacy, regardless of the global significance of games or the lateness with which museums have taken up documentation practices.

Finally, design refers to the creation of new games for museums, a practice that sits somewhat apart from the first three activities. However, of the museums in this study, four out of five had exhibited an existing videogame as part of an exhibition and also designed a new game as an interpretive strategy or educational tool. Reflections on design activities were problematised by a lack of resources and the risks of technology based implementations, but surfaced nuanced considerations of the impact of games on the experience of the museum (and vice versa). This research adds to a growing body of work attempting to understand the unique interactions between games and museums, highlighting the strength of both the Australian games and museums industries.

BIO

Nellie Seale is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her work examines the intersection of games, technology, and museums. Nellie is also an artist and a game designer, and her other research interests include Megagames, accessibility in games, and games as cultural heritage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by funding from Australian Government's Research Training Program, and the University of Melbourne Faculty of Engineering and IT Ingenium Scholar's Program.

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